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## Torn From the Flag

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**BY STEPHEN FARBER, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS**

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### *AFI Fest*

Before he died in July, Hungarian-born cinematographer Laszlo Kovacs (“Easy Rider,” “Paper Moon,” “Shampoo”) helped to shoot “Torn From the Flag,” a stirring documentary about the turmoil in his homeland that climaxed in the revolution of 1956. Director-producer Klaudia Kovacs (no relation to the cinematographer) has compiled an astute reminiscence of that turbulent era, perhaps the most comprehensive chronicle of the Hungarian uprising yet caught on film. The film, which has a special presentation at AFI Fest, deserves an audience receptive to historical documentaries.

Laszlo Kovacs and fellow Hungarian cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond actually shot some of the black-and-white footage of the revolution while they were students in Budapest; they managed to smuggle the footage out of the country at the time. Klaudia Kovacs and co-director Endre Hules sought out a wealth of other firsthand material, including newsreels and telling still photographs. The film begins at the end of World War II, when Hungary came under Russian domination, then carefully documents the events leading up to the 1956 uprising and the brutal Soviet response. An epilogue chronicles the fall of Communism throughout Eastern Europe.

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The heart of the film lies in interviews with international historians and pundits (including Henry Kissinger) as well as many of the surviving witnesses. Kovacs did a remarkable job tracking down dozens of participants, including former students, freedom fighters, Russian soldiers and even members of the Hungarian secret police, the AVO. Although there are a lot of talking heads in the film, their stories are so vivid and their perspectives so varied that the film never bogs down. The editing by Stephanie Hubbard smoothly intercuts these personal testimonials with footage shot in 1956.

Although the film has an understandable anti-Communist fervor, it never seems simplistic, uncovering a good deal of surprising information. One of the reasons for the Hungarian Revolution was that Hungarians, like others within the Soviet bloc, were emboldened that year by Nikita Khrushchev's unexpected denunciation of Stalin's brutal policies. When faced with the uprising in Hungary, Khrushchev apparently hesitated and wrestled with the fateful decision to crush the rebellion. The film also indicts the U.S. and UN for consciously deciding to stay out of the fray. For one thing, the world was distracted by the Suez crisis taking place at the same time. In addition, President Eisenhower was in the last days of his re-election campaign and was honestly fearful about the prospect of nuclear war with Russia. So the rebels' fate was sealed by the West's inaction.

This is a lively piece of history, put together with a good deal of technical skill as well as unmistakable passion.

TORN FROM THE FLAG  
Homage to 1956

Screenwriter: Endre Hules

Story by: Klaudia Kovacs

Producer: Klaudia Kovacs

Directors of photography: Laszlo Kovacs, Zoltan Honti

Music: Chris Horvath

Editor: Stephanie Hubbard

Running time — 97 minutes

No MPAA rating